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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001217

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PREF LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SINIORA SEES GOVERNMENT AS VICTOR IN
BY-ELECTION, REQUESTS CONTINUED USG SUPPORT

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) A proud and upbeat Prime Minister Siniora told CODEL Shays that the GOL is the real winner in the parliamentary by-elections: the government held free and safe elections; opposition participation signaled government legitimacy; and Michel Aoun lost his mandate to speak for the majority of the Christians. While March 14 has not chosen a single presidential candidate, Siniora strongly opposes amending the constitution to allow serving government officials such as the army commander, central bank governor, or head of the higher judicial council to become president. Finally, Siniora thanked CODEL Shays and requested continued U.S. support in four areas: maintaining independence from Syria; restoring Shebaa Farms to Lebanese control; promoting reconstruction and economic reform; and bolstering the military. End summary.

SINIORA UPBEAT, SEES GOL
AS VICTOR IN METN ELECTION

¶2. (C) A proud and upbeat Prime Minister Siniora received the Ambassador and CODEL Shays on August 7 with the news that he is ready to take a short vacation soon, his first since the July 2006 war. The GOL is the real winner in the August 5 parliamentary by-elections, Siniora boasted; the government demonstrated that it can hold free and safe elections amidst high tensions. The opposition's decision to participate boosted the credibility of the government, which the opposition has often called illegitimate.

¶3. (C) Moreover, the elections signaled a significant change in the national mood. Michel Aoun, once referred to as a "tsunami," for his supposed strength among the Christian population, no longer has a mandate to speak for 70 percent of the Maronites. Instead, a majority of the Maronite community voted for the March 14 coalition that Amine Gemayel represents.

SINIORA NARROWS HIS LIST
OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

¶4. (C) Moving on to the presidency, Siniora explained that March 14 still has not chosen a single presidential candidate. Siniora did narrow the list of contenders, however, by stating his strong opposition to amending the

constitution to extend a president's term or to allow a serving GOL official to become president, which has occurred in the past. It is time for Lebanon to look beyond the top Maronites already serving in government -- the Central Bank, the Higher Judicial Council, and the Lebanese Armed Forces -- for presidential candidates, Siniora noted. Such positions are important in their own right, and should not be seen as presidential launch pads. Siniora reminded CODEL Shays that the new president, once elected, will through consultations with parliament appoint a new prime minister, who will in turn form a new cabinet.

SINORA REQUESTS CONTINUED SUPPORT:
SYRIA, SHEBAA, REFORM, MILITARY

15. (C) Siniora thanked CODEL Shays for strong US support in the UN Security Council, to the army, and to the GOL. He reminded CODEL Shays that U.S. support to the GOL strengthens the model of moderate cultural and religious coexistence in an increasingly divided region. Siniora asked that the U.S. maintain its pressure on Syria to allow a prosperous, independent Lebanon.

16. (C) Second, Siniora asked -- as he does with all visitors -- that the US appeal to the UN to request Israel to withdraw from Shebaa Farms. Replacing Israeli with UN troops there would remove a major justification for Hizballah to maintain its arms. It would also prove that Lebanon can solve its disputes peacefully, through political negotiations, Siniora argued.

17. (C) Third, Siniora requested continued U.S. attention to reconstruction and economic reform. Lebanon will need

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additional economic assistance to recover from last summer's war with Israel, the seventh Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Lebanese businesses say they could not recover from an eighth invasion, Siniora argued, and the country needs help rebuilding and looking forward. To the same end, Lebanon would benefit from continued U.S. support to its economic reform program.

18. (C) Finally, Siniora asked CODEL Shays for continued U.S. support to the military. Lebanon's "war on terror" in Tripoli and Nahr al-Bared has been costly, but it has allowed the GOL to prove it can defend the country. When Lebanon rebuilds Nahr al-Bared Palestinian camp, the state will retain control of that territory, making it a model for other camps and a step toward reclaiming control of all territory within Lebanon's borders.

FELTMAN